



Catholic Irish Pre-Parish Register Strategy

Dan Poffenberger, AG®

Senior British and Irish Research Specialist
Family History Library
poffenbergerds@familysearch.org

The purpose of this handout is to introduce you to strategies for researching your Roman Catholic ancestors during the time before the existence of parish registers. This includes discussing a brief history of the Catholic Church in Ireland along with records issues. A brief strategy is followed by a list and description of key resources.

Introduction

For those of us with Roman Catholic Irish ancestors, research isn't easy even when parish records exist where your ancestor lived. It is extremely difficult before the existence of parish registers. The noted Irish genealogist, John Grenham, states in his book *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*:

For the descendants of Catholic tenant farmers, the limit is generally the starting date of local Catholic parish records, which varies widely from place to place. However, it would be unusual for records of such a family to go back much earlier than the 1780's, and for most people the early 1800's is the more likely limit."¹

No doubt the quote is both accurate and somewhat discouraging. Thankfully, while Irish research is generally difficult, it has never been easier thanks to the number of resources that have recently come online. These include databases, digitized records as well as catalogues of archival material. Many of the sources mentioned will not be found online and will require more traditional methods to access.

Brief History and Records Issues

Roman Catholicism has a long history in Ireland dating to Palladius in the 5th century and St. Patrick soon after. St. Patrick is credited with the initial proselytizing that made Ireland a primarily Christian nation. Pope Adrian IV reportedly gave King Henry II of England permission to invade Ireland in 1151. This brought Ireland's Christianity in line with the Roman Catholic Church until the Reformation would turn Ireland on its proverbial head. In 1534, Henry VIII appointed himself as head of the English church. He brought the English church to Ireland which became the Church of Ireland. The Church of Ireland was the state church in Ireland from 1536 to 1870 other than for a brief time during the reign of Queen Mary in the 1550's.

The importation of the English church had an impact on the Roman Catholics cannot be overstated. The "Act of Supremacy 1558" finalized Church of Ireland control. The Test Acts in the latter half of the 1600's began what is known as the Penal Period. The laws were particularly

¹ Grenham, John. *Tracing your Irish Ancestors*, 5th ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2019. FHL# 941.5 D27gj 2019 page xviii.

strictly enforced in the 1740's. Catholics could not hold public office, be educated in anything other than Church of Ireland schools, vote, bear arms or buy land. This repression lasted until the penal laws began to be relaxed in 1772, culminating with the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. Daniel O'Connell is known as The Liberator for leading the movement and he ultimately took a seat in the parliament of the United Kingdom.

During the penal period, Catholics were denied houses of worship and schools. As a result, they met at "Mass Rocks"² to celebrate Mass and educated their children in what were known as "Hedge Schools." When the penal laws were loosened, Catholic churches took time and money to build. As a result, Catholic buildings and parish registers often don't begin until the early 1800's as noted by John Grenham above.

In any case, according to the 1861 Census of Ireland, 78% of the country identified as Roman Catholic. However, when the Province of Ulster is excluded, 91% identified as Catholic. The Province of Ulster was still 50% Catholic, 20% Anglican, 26% Presbyterian with the rest identifying with other denominations.

As noted, most Catholic parish registers don't begin until at least the 1820's. Generally, registers exist earlier the further east and south in Ireland. Conversely, registers from the west and northwest may not begin until at least the 1840's. Unfortunately, this leads to one of the most persistent errors in researching Irish Catholic ancestors. Poor researchers will mistakenly find a baptismal record that could fit in another parish without evidence that their ancestors moved. They ignore the fact that their ancestors could still be in the same parish they were when the Catholic registers begin.

Strategy

The rest of this handout is dedicated to identifying key sources and strategies necessary to extend the pedigree of an Irish Catholic family before parish registers existed, if such a thing is going to be possible. Many of these are not necessarily easy and rarely would be solved with a few clicks on the internet. If you don't have a "stomach" for the proverbial "fight" you should probably focus your research efforts elsewhere.

Before going into specifics, the key principle is to conduct an exhaustive search of the records available for the parish and surrounding area. Remember that these records may be found and catalogued at the parish, county or national levels.

An indispensable book for Irish genealogists is John Grenham's book *Tracing your Irish Ancestors, 5th ed.* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2019. FHL# 941.5 D27gj 2019). It contains information on all the resources listed below. John's website <https://www.johngrenham.com/> is also loaded with information and links to other websites and catalogues. It requires a subscription to access some information.

Another key resource across the record types listed below is the Sources catalog at the National Library of Ireland <http://sources.nli.ie/>. This catalog is supposed to include all of the seminal Irish volumes titled *Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation* compiled by Richard J. Hayes.

Two more excellent volumes include *Finding Your Irish Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide* by David S. Ouimette (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2005 FHL# 941.5 D27od) and *A Genealogist's Guide to*

² A website has dedicated itself to identifying Mass Rocks. It is called www.findamassrock.com.

Discovering Your Irish Ancestors by Dwight A. Radford and Kyle J. Betit (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2001 FHL# 941.5 D27gg).

Key Resources

The following are in alphabetical order since a thoroughly exhaustive search includes looking for all of them.

Church of Ireland records

The Church of Ireland was the state church. There were advantages to having a member of the family participate. When records survive, search everything available for the corresponding Catholic parish. This includes parish registers, vestry minutes and other parish chest records. For existing records, the website for the Representative Church Body Library is a good place to start <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/about/rcb-library/>.

Estate Records

Estate records are a key source for researching your Catholic ancestors before the existence of parish registers. Most Catholics were tied to the land. They rented their land for generations. Land and property records, including estate records may indicate the names of multiple generations of tenants. A great place to start your education is at the FamilySearch Wiki in the article titled *Ireland Land and Property*.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Ireland_Land_and_Property

Many of these records are found at national and regional archives, libraries and even private libraries. Note that landlords may be English who used managers to manage their Irish properties, meaning the estate records may actually be in England.

A simple way to determine who the primary landholder(s) may be in your townland and parish is to search the pages of Griffith's *Primary Valuation* for your parish. Remember, Griffith's Valuation records are organized by civil parish rather than Catholic parish, so make sure you know both.

Local History Sources

There are a number of places to find local histories and sources. Again, these include Grenham, the Sources catalog at the National Library of Ireland as well as the "Our sources for family & local history" site at the National Archives of Ireland website.

Another useful book is *Irish Records: Sources for Family and Local History* by James G. Ryan (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publishing, 1997 FHL# 941.5 D23r 1997). The FamilySearch Catalog should also be checked at the parish, county, and country levels.

Name Lists (Census Substitutes)

Local names lists were kept for a variety of reasons by the government, churches, estates and businesses. A thorough search for records in your locality will uncover them. These include:

- Catholic Qualification Rolls, 1700-1845, www.nationalarchives.ie. These list Catholics who took an Oath of Allegiance to the King and renounced Catholicism for the Church of Ireland. This may not be a sincere renunciation so many Catholics who quietly remained in the faith are listed. This includes over 50,000 people.
- Census fragments and transcripts for a few places for the 1821-1891 Censuses, www.nationalarchives.ie and other places.
- Tithe Applotment Books, 1823-1838, www.nationalarchives.ie and other places.

- Valuation Office House, Field, Tenure & Quarto Books, 1824–1856, www.nationalarchives.ie and other places.
- Diocesan & Prerogative Marriage License Bonds Indexes, 1623–1866, www.nationalarchives.ie and other places.
- Ireland, Diocesan and Prerogative Wills & Administrations Indexes, 1595-1858, www.familysearch.org. Though most wills pre-1858 were destroyed in the Four Courts fire, the index indicates a place and time for a possible ancestor. Many wills were abstracted before they were destroyed as well. The FamilySearch Wiki article titled “Ireland Probate Records” is a good place to start.
- Irish Flax Growers List, 1796 (60,000 names, two thirds in Ulster), <https://www.failteromhat.com/flax1796.php>.

John Grenham’s book, website and other catalogues will identify many, many more, often specific to at least your county of interest.

Conclusion

As stated above, this handout is meant to be a brief introduction to the strategy and sources for researching your Irish Catholic ancestors. More detailed information can be found at the books and websites identified above. Not mentioned in detail but also worthy of pursuit are the emerging areas of DNA and digitized newspapers. Best wishes in your search.